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Camus and Levinas: Embracing the Absurd While Finding Meaning

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Abstract

Albert Camus' idea of the absurd lands one in nihilism and the danger of rationally justified suicide. His attempt to solve this problem fails because it requires that one make an arbitrary choice to live without having good reasons to do so. By using Levinas' ethics of an infinite responsibility and distinguishing between two types of meaning (cosmic and terrestrial), I propose that one can accept the condition of the absurd—where no cosmic meaning exists—and escape the problem of suicide by finding terrestrial meaning in our relations to others.



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Should people live or commit suicide? This is what Camus considers the most important question in philosophy, and he sets out to answer it by discussing the absurd. The absurd is the desire to find meaning in a world that does not have any; but Camus tries to answer the basic question of life or suicide in favor of life by proposing that people choose to live despite the lack of meaning. His solution is not very convincing; the absurd leaves people without meaning or the possibility for ethics. By considering Levinas' ethical relation of the one and the other, one can embrace the absurd and still have meaning in their lives. This way, there is a convincing answer that people should live. From the individualistic view he adopts, Camus focuses on cosmic meaning, which is meaning within the world. His rational approach prevents him from recognizing terrestrial meaning, which is found in people's lives and is independent of the world. What Levinas describes as meaning in the relation of the one to the other is a type of terrestrial meaning, and one that is significant without being arbitrary. Camus' claim that people can be happy living with the absurd fails to avoid suicide because the arbitrary choice that would bring someone happiness is inconsistent with the passivity of the absurd. Since meaning is necessary for life and happiness, one cannot genuinely live happily by accepting Camus' idea of the absurd without any meaning. In addition to a lack of meaning, Camus' idea of the absurd has no possibility for a valid ethics. I propose that instead of arbitrarily choosing to be happy while living without any meaning, people should embrace the absurd in relation to the world and recognize the possibility to find meaning in the ethical relation to others.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (MS), Albert Camus introduces the idea of the absurd, which is the contrast between the reality of the meaninglessness of the world and the human desire to find meaning in it. He says that the world is not rational in a way that coincides with human reason, and "What is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (MS 455). The world is indifferent to human beings, who are just another species residing within it; as much as people try to understand the world to manipulate it, they will not be able to. The longing for clarity is the desire to find a higher power that will give life purpose, as well as direction. Camus is referring to the idea of a higher power that will provide humans with objective meaning and instructions on how to live. The absurd is the desire to have such higher power when it does not exist and looking for meaning in the world in a world that has no meaning to give. Camus considers the study of the world through empirical science, and the fact that scientists can only come up with descriptions and nothing concrete no matter how much they study it. "That science that was to teach me everything ends up in a hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art" (Camus, MS 454). Observa-

tions are made as objectively as possible, but to make sense of those observations their meaning has to be interpreted. In that case the only way to make sense of the data is to create a hypothesis that explains the observations. This process of learning about the world by proposing hypotheses fails to provide concrete knowledge about the world, and Camus takes this as the ratification of the absurd. “Hence the intelligence, too, tells me in its way that this world is absurd” (Camus, MS 454). Science shows the world can be interpreted as orderly, but that order is not established for the benefit of human beings. People wrongly interpret the universe as if it were another human; one with much more power, but with the same ability for conscious action. People’s need for meaning and moral order pushes them to such interpretation of the world, but Camus is pointing out why that is wrong. The world does not function based on reason as it is seen in people, and what generates absurdity is not the irrationality of the world. The world has to be understood as devoid of any human characteristics; it is indifferent (in an unintentional way) to the fate of human beings, and it cannot be called rational or irrational. Absurdity is the desire of human beings to find reasons and meaning in the world as if they were inherent properties of it, when they are not. In this indifferent world, science fails to give true knowledge of it, since it can only find causes but not purpose. With this interpretation, ordinary instances of life are seen under a new light. If it unexpectedly rains in a place where rain is scarce, and a person who hates rain is getting married, it does not mean the person is being punished by God or some other higher power. Nor is it an omen about the wedding or has anything to do with the people involved. It is purely due to chance; everything is up to chance in a world where things just happen without a reason—a world that just is and does not care about the humans in it.

Camus’ idea of the absurd can be rationally accepted, especially after the death of the idea of God¹; there is no higher power that defines human life as meaningful and gives them purpose. Not even empirical science can offer any respite; there is no inherent meaning in the world. This lack of meaning can lead to nihilism, which is “The apparent meaninglessness of life, brought about in recent Western history by the bankruptcy of the evaluative structures that previously gave life consistency and direction” (Woodward, 544). Those structures that guided the lives of people when the idea of God was highly influential crumbled with the loss of religious belief and the birth of the idea of the absurd. The death of God means that there is no more guidance on how humans should live; there is no higher purpose, and no guidelines on how to live to achieve it. This idea cannot easily be replaced with reason or another moral authority. The problem with nihilism is that because there is no mean-

¹ This idea belongs to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who claimed that “God is dead” in *The Gay Science*.

ing, there is no reason to live and suicide becomes the best option. There is also the problem that without meaning there is no possibility for ethics. Simone de Beauvoir notes, “Absurdity challenges every ethics” (413). This is because in the absurd there is nothing to help one distinguish between good and bad. In the condition of the absurd distinguishing between good and bad becomes irrelevant because all actions and behaviors have the same meaning—which is none.

Camus recognizes that nihilism may lead to rationally justified suicide, so he goes on to propose a way to avoid suicide while embracing the idea of the absurd. He says that the absurd person “can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (BW 484). People should not try to avoid the absurdity of life by looking for meaning where there is none, nor by suicide. What they should do is embrace the idea of the absurd and choose to be happy despite the meaninglessness of the world. Because of the lack of meaning in life, for Camus one life is no better than another; what matters is not what type of life one lives, but the amount of it. “On the one hand the absurd teaches that all experiences are unimportant, and on the other it urges toward the greatest quantity of experiences” (Camus, BW 485). In short, Camus’ solution requires that one accept the absurd—the lack of meaning in life—and decide to be happy despite this lack of meaning. The problem with this solution is that it is asking that people choose to stay alive rather than commit suicide without giving a good reason to do so. This solution is inconsistent with the absurd; there is a passivity to the absurd in that it exists whether people choose to see it or not. It is inconsistent to urge people to embrace the absurd, and then tell them to use their free will and choose to be happy in an absurd world. Camus realizes that the absurd leaves one in a difficult situation when he writes, “I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest)” (BW 462). Dealing with the absurd brings a hopelessness that prevents the acceptance of any meaning, and this lack of meaning is dissatisfying. Camus is saying that the hopelessness does not land one in despair, but the complete absence of hope is despair. He says that the rejection of this meaningless life is not the same as giving it up, and that being dissatisfied is not something temporary that one hopes will get better. But if one rejects all meaning, there is nothing to live for. If nothing matters, then staying alive does not matter either. Camus’ solution to the problem of suicide fails because people cannot live, let alone happily, without meaning in their lives.

People are always trying to find meaning; Camus knew this, but he tried to persuade people to stop doing so because there is no meaning in the world and looking for it

is a waste of time. But meaning is necessary for humans and looking for it is necessary for survival; without it there is nothing to prevent one from committing suicide. Different writers and philosophers have recognized this need and, while different, they all agree that there must be some meaning to live life. In *My Confession*, Leo Tolstoy describes the existential despair that comes with the lack of meaning in life; a despair that makes it impossible to go on living. He writes, “It was this feeling, more powerful than any other, that was leading me toward suicide” (33). Tolstoy struggled with meaningless and suicidal thoughts and kept looking for some sort of meaning, because life without it was unbearable. Once he exhausted all possibilities of finding meaning rationally, he turned to the irrational and concluded that faith in God is what gives meaning to life. In this case, Tolstoy alludes to a higher power that gives cosmic meaning, which is what Camus rejects. But the accuracy of Tolstoy’s description of the unbearable feeling of despair that comes from nihilism is not unique to those who believe in God. What Tolstoy describes could happen to anyone, and it shows that people need to find meaning if they are to avoid suicide. Irving Singer also writes about the necessity of meaning for life. He says that “The making of a unified and meaningful whole is necessary if one hopes to have a good life” (100). In his case, Singer is referring to terrestrial meaning, which people make up according to what they value. Regardless of which type of meaning someone is after, it is clear that people look for meaning because it is necessary to live.

Because meaning is necessary for not committing suicide and for happiness, Camus’ solution to choose to be happy in a meaningless world is unrealistic. His idea of the absurd leaves no room for meaning because it focuses on the individual in relation to the world and misses the social aspect of human beings. But recognizing that humans are social beings and focusing in the interactions with others is important because the meaning found there makes life worth living. The meaning in relation to others makes it possible to embrace the absurd and not commit suicide. Also, the relation between people opens up the possibility for ethics. Emmanuel Levinas explains that our relation to the other precedes consciousness and individuality. This relation also has an ethical component, a responsibility for the other that gives meaning in an absurd world. About nihilism, Levinas says, “The nihilist agent immediately takes himself as his term and his goal, beneath the apparent gratuity of his action” (BW 49). Seeing everything as meaningless is to think about the self only, and this is where Camus ends up when employing individualism. But Levinas is talking about the relation to the other, which is asymmetrical in that it demands that the one assume an infinite responsibility for the other, without expecting the other to assume a responsibility for the one in return. That responsibility is infinite because it can never be fulfilled; it is what keeps the one in the ethical relation to the other. Levinas says that once one

is in relation to the other and individuality has been overcome, immediate results for one's actions are not needed for them to be meaningful. When the one lives in relation with the other they can live doing things that will benefit others, even if that does not happen in their lifetime. What people do in their lives "is an action for a world to come, a going beyond one's epoch – a going beyond oneself which requires the epiphany of the Other" (BW 50). People live for more than just themselves so that they do not only care for the finitude of their lives but living for the other. Then what they do with their lives may benefit those who live at the same time as them, those who will outlive them, or those who will come to live after them. It is this event of being pulled into relation with the other that can make good actions meaningful beyond their immediate results. Those good actions would be something to make the life of others (even future others who do not exist yet) better. Levinas explains that the other is "both a term of an orientation and primary signification" (BW 52). The relation to others is what provides a foundation for subjectivity; it acts as the anchor that makes meaning significant. Levinas rejects the idea that meaning in relation to others is culturally relative and has to be considered within the context in which it originates. There is a certain objectivity of meaning that is born out of the relation between two subjects, since "it is only by him [the other] that a phenomenon as a meaning is, of itself, introduced into being" (Levinas, BW 52). The relation to the other generates a meaning that is not contingent on whether the subjects involved in that relation choose to find meaning. The meaning is already there, and the one automatically enters into that relation when they interact with the other. This view of the individual as part of a social relation is more realistic; when one is in relation to others—which is all the time—one no longer looks for personal meaning but recognizes that the purpose of their life is to protect the life of the other. The other can be anyone, but there is a stronger bond to those we have personal relationships with; in such cases we are more sharply aware of the feeling of responsibility for protecting their lives. That is what the ethical relation that Levinas describes is ultimately about: a feeling of responsibility for others that makes the one's life meaningful.

There are two types of meaning: meaning in the world and meaning in our relation to others. Meaning in the world is intrinsic within it; its existence would make human beings special in some sense, and the universe would be designed to help humans obtain what they need or provide challenges that make them better. In such case we would come with some innate purpose that we are meant to live out. Meaning derived from human interactions has nothing to do with the world and everything to do with the relations with other people. Michael Levine uses Paul Edwards' terms of cosmic and terrestrial meaning, where cosmic meaning involves a greater purpose for humans in the world, and terrestrial meaning is the meaning people find in their

lives. Levine claims that terrestrial meaning “is the only relevant sense of meaning that life has” (15), but recognizes that cosmic meaning may affect the validity of some terrestrial meanings. This can happen if people find terrestrial meaning in activities that would seem irrelevant if there is no cosmic meaning. For example, people can find a simple form of terrestrial meaning in their job, but the ultimate significance of their lives may be dependent on whether there is an after-life (a form of cosmic meaning). If those people conclude that there is no after-life, the meaning they used to find within their job will not be sufficient to make life meaningful.

Camus denies that there is any cosmic meaning, and that leads to the condition of the absurd. Levinas denies that there is cosmic meaning by rejecting theodicy and the idea that suffering can be justified by attributing it to divine punishment or sacrifice. He uses the example of the millions of children who were killed during the Holocaust. These children did not die as martyrs, defending their faith, and they cannot be said to have suffered the horrors of the Holocaust as punishment for their actions. Levinas points out that “the million children killed had the innocence of children” (EN 98). And thus, their death is unjustifiable and their suffering useless. Although Levinas rejects cosmic meaning, he recognizes the terrestrial meaning that comes with the relation to others. By focusing on the individual, Camus misses this type of terrestrial meaning. The concern is whether one can reject all cosmic meaning and still have valid terrestrial meaning. Terrestrial meaning as the relation to others is not dependent on cosmic meaning and is sufficient for a meaningful life. Thus, the idea of the absurd and meaning in life can coexist if one realizes the importance of the relation to others. In such case it does not matter that there is no greater purpose for humans in the world; a person’s purpose is found in their responsibility to others.

In *The Stranger* Camus set out to point out the meaninglessness of the world, but by making his character, Meursault, detached from everyone, Camus ignores the meaning found in the relations with others. Meursault is Camus’ absurd hero, someone who does not fool himself with hope or the longing for meaning and order in life. He embraces the absurd and is even able to find happiness in trivial things such as the sky and the sea, celebrating the indifference of the world. His participation in human rituals makes them seem ridiculous because he does not really care for the people involved. When he attends his mother’s funeral, he remarks on all the mundane details that come with it instead of noting anything about feelings and personal connections. When he is at his mother’s funeral, her friends walk in and this is what he describes: “When they’d sat down, most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, their lips sucked in by their toothless mouths, so that I couldn’t tell if they were greeting me or if it was just a nervous tic” (10). Surely there is nothing meaningful about a bunch of old people sitting up at night and making odd noises, but there

is something meaningful about a group of old people who try to stay up together and grieve over their dead friend. The meaning of the funeral can only be appreciated if one has emotional connections to the deceased and the other people in attendance.

In *The Meursault Investigation* Daoud's main character, Harun, is not devoid of personal attachments. He loves his brother, Musa who is absurdly killed by Camus' protagonist, and his brother's death is no instance of meaninglessness for him. Musa's death impacts his mother and makes her bitter, and it also makes Harun feel guilty for not being the one who died. Seen under the light of Levinas' descriptions of the responsibility the one feels for the life of others, and especially loved ones, one can see that part of that guilt can be a feeling of failure, the failure to save Musa's life. This guilt is unreasonable, but the responsibility for the other is not restricted by reason. In Harun's relations to his dead brother and bitter mother, there are complex interactions and feelings that are beyond reason, and those interactions are where there is meaning. Harun is so impacted by Musa's death that he spends the rest of his life wrestling with the fact and trying to spread the story about his brother to give him an identity. Harun says, "That's the reason why I've learned to speak this language, and to write it too: so I can speak in the place of a dead man, so I can finish his sentences for him" (1). Harun's life is filled with meaning because of his relationship to his brother, who was murdered. After his brother's death, his goal becomes to rescue his brother's identity, which he lost after being murdered and ignored to the point of not even being named. This meaning is not a denial of the absurd; Harun is not looking for a purpose within the world. He finds meaning in his relation to his brother, and spends his life working to give him recognition.

Because Camus' Meursault is not involved in any relation to others, even though he has the opportunity, he is seen as an outcast. Daoud says that *The Stranger* was written by a dead person. "That story – a corpse wrote it, not a writer. You can tell by the way he suffers from the sun and gets dazzled by colors and has no opinion on anything except the sun, the sea, and the surrounding rocks" (Daoud, 5). Meursault is an example of how far reason can deviate from the ethical demand in the relation to the other. In this case, individuality has been blown out of proportion so that a person can be unrealistically portrayed as if without meaningful social interactions. Levinas explains that consciousness is born out of the need for justice when one encounters more than one others. Consciousness is a product of the infinite responsibility of the one for the other, but people often forget that. This is the case with Meursault, who was purely rational and distracted when it came to other people; this distraction caused him to miss out in the meaning that comes from relating to others.

This paper has shown that Camus' idea of the absurd can be reasonably accepted,

but his solution to the problem of suicide cannot. The problems with the absurd are that without meaning there is no reason to live, and ethics are not possible. Levinas' description of the ethical relation of the one to the other offers the possibility of meaning that can coexist with the absurd. Life's meaning is in living for the other; being conscious of the infinite responsibility that comes with this relation and working to fulfill it. It was also shown that human beings should be considered immersed in society rather than individually, since this is the most realistic form of human life. And it is important to realize that reason is secondary to the responsibility for the other, rather than pretend that people are absolutely rational. That unreasonable element of human life is perhaps more important than consciousness, and what ultimately makes life meaningful and ethics possible.

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